

Governor J. Kevin Stitt Inaugural Address Transcript

Thank you, Corbin.

Thank you Pro Temp Greg Treat, Speaker Charles McCall, and members of the legislature.

Thank you Lt. Governor Matt Pinnell, and congratulations to all statewide elected officials. I look forward to rolling up my sleeves and working with you on the important tasks we have ahead to make Oklahoma a Top Ten state.

Thank you Chief Justice Noma Gurich and Justices of the State Supreme Court.

I want to thank Governor Fallin, Governor Keating, Governor Nigh, Governor Henry... for being here today.

To my beautiful wife Sarah, I wouldn't be here today without you by my side over the past 20 years. Your heart and compassion for people is unmatched.

To my six children – Natalie, Drew, Kate, Piper, Remington, Houston – I love you; I am so proud of you.

Thank you to my mom and dad, my two brothers, and Sarah's family.

Honored guests, friends, and my fellow Oklahomans, it is with deep gratitude and thanks to my heavenly father and with determination in my heart that I stand before you today.

You see, I'm a pretty typical Oklahoma son, like so many of you.

I moved around a little bit as a kid – attended first grade in Wayne, Oklahoma, population 700, and then graduated from Norman High School. I spent many summers in Skiatook helping my grandparents on their dairy farm and spent Sundays in church listening to my dad preach.

My dad raised me and my two brothers to believe we could do anything we put our minds to. He would tell us, "Don't ever give up... don't ever quit... the future doesn't just happen – you make it happen - so dream big."

These words echoed in my mind and through many sleepless nights over the last 20 years while building an Oklahoma company with my wife Sarah and raising a family that we love dearly.

It wasn't easy. We took great risks as a family... made hard decisions... sacrificed... weathered difficult times... and learned from each other, from our employees, and from

our community. To my Gateway team members, thank you for being a part of our American dream.

Two years ago, the idea of running for governor was still just a small mustard seed. I traveled the country visiting my offices in other states, seeing their economies take off and thrive. They were recovering from our nation's historic recession. I would then come home to the state that I love to find us struggling, stuck at the bottom in every category that matters.

We don't have to relive the past few years – everyone was touched by it.

But it was this environment that caused me to reach deep and ask what more can i do to make a difference, to address a pattern seen throughout our state's history – from the dust bowl of the 1930s to the oil glut of the 1980s – where we have lived for each boom and starved in each bust.

Like you, I was frustrated;

Like you, I am motivated.

I see untapped potential;

I see opportunity.

I see great men and women around me. I see promises to be kept. I see jobs. I see progress.

I see a Top Ten Oklahoma.

I know it is possible because I spent the past 18 months traveling the state, listening to Oklahomans in all 77 counties, holding more than 300 town halls, knocking on the doors of strangers, and learning the platform and mandate Oklahoma wants for its governor.

Here is what I heard: we know we can be, and should, be a Top Ten state.

Why? Because...

We are Oklahoma, proud of our hard-working, God-fearing people.

It is because of Oklahoma's work ethic that in Lawton one of Goodyear's largest tire manufacturing facilities in the world is located...

That American airlines has its largest maintenance and repair facility in the world in Tulsa...

That we are the birthplace of QuickTrip, HobbyLobby and Sonic.

It's because of Oklahoma's work ethic that our farmers and ranchers are top five in the nation in the production of beef cattle, wheat, canola, cotton and pecans.

We are Oklahoma, proud of our rich, natural resources - from abundant water in the east to oil, natural gas, and wind energy stretching across the west.

It's this entrepreneurial spirit and innovation with our resources that has allowed Oklahoma to play a leading role in making America energy independent. In Oklahoma, we are number four in oil production, number three in natural gas production, and number two in wind energy production.

We are Oklahoma, proud of our abundant land and our central location in the United States.

It's what makes us home for a booming aerospace industry, five thriving military bases, and the largest, most inland river port in the nation with the Port of Catoosa.

It's this pride that will allow us to move forward together: not as republicans or democrats, but as Oklahomans locked hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm.

And to that, we must ask, "What is it going to take to get this turnaround started?"

Are we ready to look each other in the eye and honestly say, "We got this, we can do this together?"

I am.

But for us to be successful, I need you to join me. State government is not the sole answer to our problems.

We must get involved in our schools, in our churches, in our neighborhoods, in our local non-profits to diagnose and solve the unique challenges county-by-county, that no person falls through the cracks - because every life in Oklahoma is worthy of our respect and help.

Working together, we will be a top ten state. And as I begin serving today as your next governor, let me tell you where Oklahoma's turnaround starts for me.

It starts today by demanding accountability in our state government.

In this administration, we are going to get to the bottom of every tax dollar spent.

We are going to ensure every dollar matches the values and vision of Oklahoma becoming a Top Ten state.

We will bring Oklahoma fully into the digital age to maximize our services while creating an efficient process that allows us to do it at the lowest possible cost.

We can only guarantee such accountability when state agencies understand that they exist to serve - and to answer to the people of Oklahoma.

We need to change how Oklahoma's 400 agencies and commissions are comprised. Our current system gives agencies too much independence from the voter – they have the ability to ignore executive orders, skirt around laws passed by the legislature, hide pockets of money, and protect their own interests by hiring lobbyists.

To my fellow Oklahomans – this must change if we are going to move the needle!

And let me speak directly to state employees working across our state agencies. We have a great opportunity and you should get excited! I need you to step forward with ways to deliver efficiencies, to modernize, to meet the needs of the Oklahoma customer, to help us become a customer-focused government. With new leadership, you will be the change agents and innovators that help us become Top Ten.

To my fellow elected officials in the House and the Senate – let's unite around delivering this accountability. The people deserve it. And with it, state government will live within its financial means, and we will execute a top-to-bottom review, set meaningful priorities, and establish measurable goals.

And Oklahoma's Turnaround also starts with education, and I am fully convinced Oklahoma can have a top ten education system. I also see the nation pointing to Oklahoma and saying, this is what is possible!

That is already true of Oklahoma's Pre-K program and it's already true with access to career tech schools statewide - a system that has been nimble and robust in helping us train the workforce of today.

We have much to be proud of, and I commend the legislature for the progress made last year. But we still have much more progress to make...

It will require us to recognize that reforming and improving education should not be a partisan issue. Getting our children ready to thrive and face the challenges of the future should be our shared priority.

We will break down silos between common education, career tech, and higher education. But more government money is not the answer alone. We need families working together with the school to help children unlock their full potential and overcome all odds.

Every child in Oklahoma deserves to be inspired by the very power of education itself and the potential of a bright future. This is why we will value teachers and seek to recruit the very best teachers in the profession.

In a Stitt administration, we will also work to address our ranking in incarceration. I want to take a moment to recognize Governor Mary Fallin for starting the hard work and beginning a much-needed conversation around this issue. Thank you, Governor.

My eyes were open to this issue while on the campaign trail a year ago in December when I met a lady named Rhonda. Rhonda runs a ministry in Claremore where she provides opportunity for women reentering society after prison and drug addiction.

Rhonda told me that her own incarceration saved her life from drugs, but she is sounding the alarm for the extreme length of prison time that women today are receiving for non-violent crimes in Oklahoma.

These sentences make reintegration into society much more challenging. They often destroy families and fall short in respecting the dignity, worth and potential of people who have made mistakes and need help.

Rhonda's ministry – and many like it across our state – are a vital component to helping Oklahoma tackle our #1 ranking of incarceration. As a state, we must do better, and we must believe in the power of second chances, of grace and redemption. It will require us to step forward together as citizens, as churches, as job creators, as a government to bring meaningful change.

Rhonda, thank you for being here today.

Finally, in all that we do, and the decisions that we make, it will come back to growth. We will ask ourselves:

- Does this new bill,
- Does this new investment,
- Does this regulation grow Oklahoma?

We are at our best when people are gainfully employed, when wages are improving, when people have freedom to innovate and access to opportunity.

Today, the nation needs to hear, the business community needs to hear, rural Oklahoma needs to hear... manufacturing, aerospace, the technology industry... in a Stitt administration, Oklahoma is open for business.

We will help our local businesses expand. We will recruit. We will train and supply the modern-day workforce. And we will bring Oklahoma to the world and the world to Oklahoma.

Friends, we are either moving forward or we are falling behind. And I believe we have more opportunity today than any day in our history to start a business, to expand an existing one... to move our state forward.

This may seem too bold for some. Big goals can often feel unattainable, but don't say that to a guy who was told it was impossible to build a nationwide mortgage company with just \$1,000 and a computer, and who was told a political outsider couldn't become governor.

As we close our time together, here is my commitment to you: you the people come first. I commit to you to be a good listener, a continuous learner, a committed communicator, and a bold leader for the decisions that make a difference for today's children and the next generation.

I'm humbled by the trust you placed in me to serve as your governor, and I thank you for your prayers, for your support and encouragement. Thank you for your commitment to making Oklahoma a great place to live, to work, and to raise a family.

Let's get this done together, because Oklahoma's turnaround starts right here, right now.